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ABSTRACT

Of all the developments in reading research during the past 30 years, few have provided as much fodder for the wars over whole language as "invented spelling." Research on invented spelling led to a developmental theory of how children experiment with phonemic rules and patterns, and scholars urged teachers to allow children to spell inventively in the earliest stages of learning. Critics who pounce on invented spelling as a source of horror stories are not entirely off-base--some teachers have adopted practices associated with invented spelling in inappropriate ways. Early researchers never expected invented spelling to become a classroom activity in and of itself. Teachers need to be aware of the nuances of research on invented spelling and the related larger controversies. Encouraging young children's experiments with language is not inconsistent with direct instruction in phonics or with a teacher's commitment to the importance of correct spelling. (RS)

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THE POLITICS OF LITERACY

The Case of Invented Spelling: How Theory Becomes Target Practice

A new way of looking at children's experiments with spelling turns into a cause célèbre for conservative critics of education

BY EDWARD MILLER

Of all the developments in reading research during the past 30 years, few have provided as much fodder for the wars over whole language as "invented spelling." Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Charles Read and other researchers noticed that young children's writing revealed important information about how they make sense of spoken language and construct strategies to represent what they hear (see "Teaching Spelling," *HEL*, November 1985). Linguists like Carol Chomsky pointed out that early writing, with alphabet blocks and similar materials, was a powerful way to encourage reading.

"Children ought to learn how to read by creating their own spellings for familiar words as a beginning," Chomsky wrote in 1971 in *Childhood Education*. "What better way to *read* for the first time than to try to recognize the very word you have just carefully built up on the table in front of you?"

Chomsky emphasized the importance of "being attuned to the child's pronunciation" and not inhibiting preschoolers' first attempts to write by insisting on proper spelling. She told the story of three-year-old Harry, who had learned how to spell his name, which he pronounced "Hawwy." When he tried to write the word *wet* he chose the initial letter *r*.

"Now *r* is correct for him, as a matter of fact," wrote Chomsky. "In this child's pronunciation, *r* and *w* are alike when initial in the syllable. For him *wet* begins the same as the second syllable of his name."

She continued: "Had I said 'No!' when Harry chose the *r* and insisted on *w* (which corresponds to no reality for him), he would have gotten that sad message children so often get in school: 'Your judgments are not to be trusted. Do it my way whether it makes sense or not; forget about reality.' Far better to let him trust his own accurate judgments and progress according to them than to impose an arbitrariness that at this point would only interfere."

Research on invented spelling led to a developmental theory of how children experiment with phonemic rules and patterns, and scholars urged teachers to allow children to spell inventively in the earliest stages of learning. This view fit neatly with the emerging philosophy of whole language, which emphasized early writing and eschewed the repetitive drills and workbook exercises of strict phonics instruction.

Gone Haywire

To the critics of whole language and other "child-centered" learning theo-

ries, the very idea of "invented spelling" is ridiculous. The notion that teachers should ignore spelling errors—or actually encourage children to spell words wrong—confirms their view that the liberal education establishment has abandoned traditional values and gone completely haywire. The most vocal critics pounce on invented spelling as a source of horror stories that illustrate just how mindless American education has become.

Charles Sykes relates one such story at the beginning of a chapter called "The New Illiteracy" in his 1995 book, *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, which received admiring reviews in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*: "Mrs. Wittig couldn't fathom why her child's teacher would write 'Wow!' and award a check-plus (for above average work) to a paper that read: 'I'm goin to has majik skates. Im goin to go to disenelan. Im goin to bin my mom and dad and brusr and sisd. We r go to se mickey mouse.'"

Sykes explains that "many educationists [his term for trendy, liberal educators] in charge of teaching reading and writing no longer believe that it is necessary to teach or to correct spelling. Educationists noticed that many children misspelled words and realized that it would take a great deal of time, effort, and commitment to fix the problem. Instead, they discovered 'invented spelling.' Children weren't getting the words wrong, they were acting as 'independent spellers,' and any attempt to correct them would not only stifle their freedom, but smother their tender young creativity aborning. Such ideas have been widely seized upon by educationists who see the natural, unconscious, and effortless approach to spelling not only as progressive and child-centered, but a lot less work as well."

Advocates of whole language, Sykes continues, "believe that children learn 'naturally,' that children learn best when 'learning is kept whole, meaningful, interesting and functional,' and that this is more likely to happen when children make their own choices as part of a 'community of learners' in a noncompetitive environment. 'Whole language' advocates describe 'optimal literacy environments,' which they say 'promote risk taking and trust.'"

Sykes doesn't bother to explain the actual origins of "educationist" ideas about invented spelling in developmental psychology and linguistics. But he adroitly skewers the whole-language movement by making fun of its warm and fuzzy jargon while suggesting that the real reason why this philosophy has become so popular is that teachers are lazy.

Missing the Point

One-sided as Sykes's attack is, it is not entirely off-base. Some teachers have adopted practices associated with invented spelling in inappropriate ways. Read, Chomsky, and other researchers wrote about the value of invented spelling in the context of very young children's first attempts to write and read. They encouraged teachers to pay attention to the systematic thinking revealed by kids' inventive spelling (rather than to see only errors to be corrected) and to use these insights to guide their teaching strategies. They never expected invented spelling to become a classroom activity in and of itself or to replace the organized teaching of proper spelling in elementary school.

Early researchers never expected invented spelling to become a classroom activity in and of itself.

Yet that is just what has happened in many classrooms. Marcia Invernizzi of the University of Virginia and colleagues argue that Read's findings have been misapplied. They say that his fundamental insight, "that invented spellings provide a direct clue to a child's current understanding of how written words work, and that direct instruction in spelling can be timed and targeted to this understanding, has, for the most part, been missed."

The theory of developmental word knowledge traces children's understanding across three overlapping levels of English spelling: sound, pattern, and meaning. In the first stage, children perceive the direct one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds. At the second tier, they realize that the system is more complicated and begin to recognize letter combinations and patterns that have an indirect relation to sound—that a silent *e*, for example, can affect the pronunciation of the vowel preceding it. At the third level, they begin to observe the connections between spelling and meaning, as in polysyllabic Latin- and Greek-derived words. Thus, the second syllable in *competition* is spelled with an *e*, not because of its sound but because it is related to the word *compete*.

Invernizzi and her colleagues outline a system of organized spelling instruction that is guided by teachers' analysis of their students' invented spelling and their levels of development. They give examples such as the following writing sample from Tasha, a sixth-grader:

> If I could be the managor of the cafeteria at Linkhorne Middle School, I would make some awsome changes. The instalation of a sound system would by my first decesion. The kids could rotate bringing there own choice of musick. Then I would make radacle changes in the menu like we'd have hamburger and fries and no rootine school menues.

The researchers note that Tasha has a free-flowing style and uses polysyllabic words. They write that "the teacher needs to be able to see Tasha's spellings not as errors but as inventions that signal the next move toward correctness that Tasha needs to make." Tasha is poised, they argue, to enter the "meaning" tier in her word knowledge, but her spelling inventions "revolve around the pattern principle of the tier before."

The insights gained from such research are valuable, and many teachers will agree that it is important to recognize the spirit in Tasha's writing rather than to focus only on its flaws. It would be absurd to accuse Invernizzi of believing that it is not necessary to teach spelling. But we also see trouble brewing here: to say that Tasha's misspellings are "not errors" is to guarantee that some sixth-grade parents will panic. Thus the reasonable investigations of researchers become the inflammatory rhetoric of exposés and talk radio.

The Real Question

Even some teacher-friendly publications have obscured rather than illuminated the invented-spelling feud. *NEA Today* published a "debate" between two third-grade teachers on opposite sides of the issue. But the headline—"Can Kids 'Lrn tu Spel' by Misspelling?"—reveals a fundamental misconception about the role of invented spelling. Of course kids can't learn to spell by misspelling. The real question is, "Can teachers learn to teach better

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by seeing misspellings in a different way?" The defender of invented spelling in this debate, unfortunately, did nothing to clarify the point.

Advocates of whole language have been bludgeoned with the club of invented spelling abuses, but many experts who are convinced of the value of invented spelling actually favor a balanced approach to the teaching of reading that combines whole-language and direct phonics instruction (see page 1). "The process of invented spelling is essentially a process of phonics," writes Marilyn Jager Adams in her landmark study, *Beginning to Read*. "The evidence that invented spelling activity simultaneously develops phonemic awareness and promotes understanding of the alphabetic principle is extremely promising, especially in view of the difficulty with which children are found to acquire these insights through other methods of teaching."

Teachers need to be aware of the nuances of research in invented spelling and the larger controversies they relate to. Methods for teaching reading and writing are not all-or-nothing propositions: encouraging young children's experiments with language is not inconsistent with direct instruction in phonics or with a teacher's commitment to the importance of correct spelling.

For Further Information

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